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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001275

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [TBIO](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: CHARGE MEETS THE MINISTER OF HEALTH

REF: A. RANGOON 1265

[B](#). RANGOON 1257 AND PREVIOUS

[C](#). RANGOON 1182 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: The Charge made a courtesy call November 8 on Dr. Kyaw Myint, Minister of Health. The minister assured the Charge of the GOB's commitment to transparency on avian influenza outbreaks in Burma and his ministry has several initiatives to mitigate the spread of AI. The minister described improved access to project sites by international organizations and international. He said "skeleton staff" would remain in Rangoon to work with the international community now that the MOH has already begun moving to the new capital Pyinmana. End Summary.

FIGHTING AI WITH MEAGER RESOURCES

[2](#). (C) The Charge, joined by poloff, called on the Minister of Health, Dr. Kyaw Myint, on November 8. The directors general of the five divisions within the MOH silently sat in. Avian Influenza figured prominently during the 45-minute discussion. The minister repeatedly expressed his strong commitment to transparency in reporting on suspected AI outbreaks in Burma. He also committed to preventing AI from spreading from Burma to the rest of the world, notwithstanding "meager resources." He recounted a recent disease outbreak in Kyaikto, Mon State, confirmed as a non-AI virus (ref B). He also mentioned two outbreaks of disease among chickens that were determined to be Newcastle disease, and recent deaths among ducks brought to Rangoon from Bago Division that had been investigated by the Livestock and Fisheries Ministry. In the latter case, the ducks were quarantined, not destroyed, because they did not have the H5 virus.

[3](#). (C) When the Charge's inquired about Burma's assistance needs for AI, the minister replied, "Tell me what your restrictions will allow you to do and I will tell you how you can help." He admitted that "we don't have much Tamiflu" stockpiled and said more would be welcome. The Charge responded that the USG also has very limited stocks. The minister said he was talking to the Chinese about supplementing the limited Tamiflu supplies he has received from WHO. The minister said that AI laboratory test kits are urgently needed and would welcome such kits from the United States. The Charge promised to relay the request to Washington.

[4](#). (C) The minister described several initiatives his ministry had initiated to track possible outbreaks of AI in Burma, including:

-- Establishing "sentinel survey sites" around the country to monitor areas vulnerable to outbreaks.

-- Establishing "SWAT teams" to respond quickly to suspected outbreaks.

-- Preparing AI awareness messages to be aired on prime time TV.

-- Training MOH personnel through WHO-sponsored workshops and conferences on AI in Geneva and Australia.

[5](#). (C) The Charge mentioned the Embassy had discovered that personnel at a wetland bird sanctuary had received no guidance from the GOB regarding possible AI outbreaks among migrating birds (ref C). The minister said he had not been aware of this before and would convey our concerns to the Forestry Minister, which has responsibility for the park. At the end of the meeting, without prompting, he repeated his intention to work with the Forestry Ministry on AI in migratory birds.

GLOBAL FUND SAFEGUARDS A STRAITJACKET?

[6](#). (C) The minister lamented the termination of the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis (GF). He said that so much of the funds went into supporting safeguards that there was little left for fighting the diseases. He

recalled how "time consuming" it was to try to comply with all the safeguards. The Charge related problems experienced in other countries where corrupt officials pocketed large amounts of donor assistance. The minister said he understood that the GF faced similar problems with government corruption in Uganda. He pointed out, however, that in Burma GF funds went to UNDP, not to the GOB, and it was still terminated. He concluded that he had a "hands off" policy regarding cash assistance and had "nothing more to say" about the GF. MALARIA IS "NORMAL" AND TB "NOT BAD"

17. (C) When the Charge asked about the status of malaria and tuberculosis in Burma, the minister responded that malaria follows a "normal pattern." (Note: UN sources recently reported that malaria is one of the top three killers of children in Burma and that Burma accounts for 50% of malaria mortality in WHO's Southeast Asia Region, which includes India. A UN source also said that no more than 40% of all malaria cases in Burma are reported to health authorities. End Note.) The minister said that the status of TB in Burma is "not bad." He noted his own expertise as a thoracic surgeon and his years of treating TB cases in Burma, accordingly he placed high priority on reducing TB infections.

NOW YOU CAN GET THERE FROM HERE

18. (C) To the Charge's inquiry about IOs and INGOs needing better access to project sites around the country, the minister responded that with the exception of Wa-controlled territory, the GOB has agreed to grant permits for international staff to stay at project sites for up to three months at a time. After returning to Rangoon for a week or two, they can return to the field for another three-month stint. He said the INGOs were satisfied with this arrangement. (Note: This agrees with what INGOs have recently told us. End Note.)

NORTHWARD HO!

19. (C) The minister confirmed that the MOH would be moving to the newly announced administrative capital Pyinmana (ref A). He just returned from an inspection visit to Pyinmana on November 7 and expects that the MOH will complete the move by the end of January 2006. The MOH will maintain a "skeleton staff" in Rangoon to respond to inquiries within a few hours, but "not more than a day." To the Charge's question about whether there would be transportation and communication links with Pyinmana, the minister replied, "They must have plans." He reassured us that it is only a five-hour drive from Rangoon. On whether the GOB will provide offices and homes for civil servants, he replied, "I think so." He joked and compared the move to American settlers traveling west in covered wagons. As we departed the MOH, we observed a Burmese "covered wagon," a Chinese-built military truck with a canvas roof, loading ministry furniture for the trip north.

COMMENT: THIS IS SOMEONE WE CAN WORK WITH

110. (C) Dr. Kyaw Myint has a good reputation among the INGOs as being genuinely interested in facilitating their programs and not interfering in them. He claimed that he could have had a lucrative medical practice in Denver, where he did his post-graduate studies, but "my people need me." He is one of a very few civilians remaining in the cabinet. That he is Senior General Than Shwe's physician no doubt explains why. He is the first to admit that he has to answer to his own bosses, but he tries. We have many restrictions on doing business with the GOB. To the degree that we can reward good behavior, this ministry and this minister appear to be the only officials committed to doing something for the people of Burma. Recognizing the worldwide threat posed by AI, we should be able to supply some laboratory test kits to assist in stopping the spread of this disease far from our shores. End Comment.

VILLAROSA